

Flooding of mines in Zimbabwe leaves 24 dead, dozens more missing

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On Sunday, the bodies of 24 miners were recovered from Silver Moon Mine and Cricket Mine in Kadoma, after heavy rains last week caused the collapse of a dam wall, resulting in the massive flooding of the two mines. At around midnight on Wednesday, February 13, the wall of water exploded from the dam and surged into the mines, completely flooding the tunnels where several dozen miners were reported to have descended.

The two mines, adjacent to one another in an area known as Battlefields, share three linked shafts which run 30 meters (about 100 feet deep) with 20-meter-wide tunnels (65 feet). The massive flood completely filled the mine's tunnels to the surface.

The town of Kadoma, over 100 miles from the capital city, Harare, is the center of mining industry in the Mashonaland West province that holds significant deposits of gold, copper and nickel.

An estimated 70 miners are believed to have been inside the mine when the flood occurred. Of this number, only eight have been rescued alive. With around 40 missing and still unaccounted for, rescue workers stated to the media Sunday that they have little hope of finding survivors.

Describing the terror of the moment flood waters rushed into the mines, Charles Mwenye, a 41-year-old survivor, told the UK *Guardian* that four friends were with him in the shaft. "I could have been the one trapped underground too. When I was on my way out of the shaft, I saw a flood coming straight in ... Thank God I am alive. The police came yesterday and today but nothing has been done. All my hope is lost now."

Many of the disaster's victims were jobless youth under the age of 30. Depicting the gravity of the tragedy, Lovejoy Mbedzi spoke to the *Guardian* of her brother, Evan Chibuwe, 29, who is still missing since he went into the mine. "I am very sad. This mine shaft

is full of boys between the ages of 18 and 30. They are so young and don't deserve to die in this manner."

Also speaking to the social catastrophe experienced by surviving family members, for whom in many cases mining was their only source of income, Ida Gwangwari spoke about losing her son, Donald. "I don't have a funeral policy, burying my child will be very difficult."

Rescue workers are critically hampered by a lack of equipment, with only hand shovels, picks, and buckets to remove the massive amounts of mud and water burying the miners underground. Much-needed mechanical pumps were not available in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and were brought to the site the following day by the Civil Protection Unit (CPU), the country's national emergency response agency.

The following day, Wednesday, Cecilia Chitiyo, the Mashonaland West provincial administrator of CPU, told the media, "We urgently need to mobilise more pumps. As many as we can because the water levels are continuously rising from beneath and we are not sure if the miners had reached an aquifer below."

Fortunate Muzulu, the Mhondoro-Ngezi district administrator, told the media the miners were operating illegally and entered the mine under the cover of night without the knowledge of the mine's owners.

Cricket Mine is owned by mining giant Rio Zimbabwe (RioZim), which claimed that the mine had been decommissioned. RioZim spokesperson Wilson Gwatiringa told the BBC that miners had illegally gained access to sealed portions of the mine that were not in operation.

The mining tragedy comes amid an immense social and economic crisis wracking Zimbabwe. The downturn in the economy in recent years has led to skyrocketing inflation, which has made the cost of

food, housing, medical care and education prohibitively high for the majority of the Zimbabwean masses.

The collapse of Zimbabwe's economy has led to high unemployment, felt most acutely in rural areas like Kadoma. Many workers, having no economic prospects, have taken to mining in shafts that have become disused and decommissioned.

The mining disaster at Kadoma is only the latest in three such catastrophes occurring in Africa in the last two weeks.

On February 7, at South Africa's Gloria coal mine, 12 miners were killed and several others trapped after a methane gas explosion collapsed the mine's tunnels. Following this, on February 13 in Liberia, on the same day as the flooding disaster at Kadoma, at least seven miners were killed and 40 trapped after a gold mine collapse. Adding insult to injury, Liberian police arrested survivors for illegal mining.

The key component to the high fatality rate of workers in mines and other industries in Zimbabwe and across the continent is the complete lack of any safety regulations and equipment in place to protect workers.

Social calamities like the mine disaster at Kadoma must be understood in the broader context. Zimbabwe, despite possessing vast economic resources, is a country blighted by extreme poverty experienced by the majority of the masses. While the working class confronts this pervasive social misery, a tiny layer of the ruling elite at the top of society has accumulated vast wealth at their expense.

Coinciding with the growing class struggle internationally, there are growing signs that the working class in Zimbabwe is coming into open class conflict with the wealthy elite that rules the country with an iron grip.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on Monday, the deadly disaster at Kadoma took place amid a crackdown on popular opposition to the government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, including the repression of workers who are fed up with their social immiseration.



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